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Iranian Scripts for Aramaic Languages: The Origin of the Mandaic Script

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The unique cursive script still employed by the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, which is unlike any other script found in the modern Middle East, may provide a clue to the obscure origins of their written literature and their emergence as a distinct religious tradition. Comparison with ancient scripts from the regions where the Mandaeans are found today indicates that the Mandaic script is a product of the late Parthian period (and more specifically the second century C.E.*) and has its closest affinities with a group of scripts ranging from Anatolia and the Caucasus in the north to Characene and Elymais in the south, all of which appear to derive from or to be heavily influenced by the Parthian chancery script. The association of the Mandaeans with the later Arsacids is corroborated by their own legends and their textual tradition.*

THE MANDAIC SCRIPT

Nearly every discussion of Mandaean origins has dealt with the issue of their peculiar script. While some scholars have touted its importance and others have questioned its relevance, no scholar of Mandaean origins has failed to take the script into consideration. The reasons for this are manifold. The Mandaeans themselves consider their script to be as sacred as their literature; according to one of their traditions, it predates mankind (Drower 2002: 240).[1] The fact that the script of the modern manuscripts is not appreciably different from that of the earliest manuscripts[2] illustrates how faithfully the Mandaeans have transmitted their sacred literature across the centuries.[3] As the vehicle of their religious literature, inextricably tied to their traditions, the script is one of the most characteristic features of the Mandaean community. As such, it can be fruitfully compared with other epigraphic, historical, and linguistic evidence to provide us with a rough terminus ante quem for the formation of their community—even if it is quite feasible that the Mandaeans adopted their script centuries after their emergence as a religious tradition.[4] Once the age of the script is determined, a closer examination of the relationship of the script itself to its contemporaries can also illuminate the cultural and social circumstances prevailing at the time of its adoption.

The Mandaic script is unique among the scripts of the ancient Near East, and it is precisely this uniqueness that makes it so difficult to contextualize. Even relatively basic data, such as its relation to the other Aramaic scripts or the date of its adoption by the

[1] Cf. the Jewish tradition in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (1:2:10–12) that the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet were one of God's first creations and, with the ten Sephiroth, composed the foundation of all things.

[2] The earliest manuscripts date to the eighth century C.E.; see Naveh 1970: 33.

[3] This is not the case for profane or magical texts, which are written in a later, more colloquial form of the language; see Nöldeke 1898: 143.

[4] This is more often the norm than the exception. The two cultures to which the Mandaeans are most frequently compared, the Jews and the Zoroastrians, adopted their most characteristic scripts centuries after the emergence of their religious traditions. In fact, the Manichaeans were the first to adopt a particular script as a vehicle for their religious texts, which reproduce (presumably preexisting) portions of the Mandaean liturgy; see Säve-Söderbergh 1949: 137–62 and Colpe 1964.

Mandaeans, are unknown and have been hotly debated. The largest body of physical evidence for the Mandaic script consists of a corpus of incantation bowls that have been discovered in various locations in Mesopotamia, which has been dated to the period coinciding with the emergence of Islam.[5] Additionally, there is a smaller corpus of lead amulets, which offer the earliest examples of any form of the Mandaic script. The earliest of these were inscribed in the fourth or even third century, although they continue to be made even today.[6] Beyond these few examples, however, it is difficult to say when and where the Mandaeans adopted their script. The Mandaic script is also unique by virtue of the fact that even its earliest inscriptions feature a fully developed system of vowel letters. In this respect, it has no direct parallel among the scripts of several Aramaic dialects that were in use in this region during the second and third centuries C.E.[7]

There are three major schools of thought about the origins of the Mandaic script:

1. The Mandaic script is derived from the Palmyrene or Nabataean script, like other cursive ligatured scripts in the region, such as Syriac or Arabic. This assumes that the Mandaic script originated in Syria and traveled west with the Mandaeans. This is the oldest view, espoused by Mark Lidzbarski and Rudolf Macuch among others (Lidzbarski 1909; Macuch 1971).
2. The Mandaic script is derived from the Elymaic script, which is attested in the later coins of Elymais (modern Khuzestān in Iran), from the second century C.E., when Elymais was a client kingdom of the Parthian Empire. This view originated with Joseph Naveh (Naveh 1970).[8]
3. The Mandaic script is derived from the Characenean script, which is imperfectly known from a small number of legends found on coins minted in Mesene (southern Iraq) during this same period. This view was first suggested by P. W. Coxon (Coxon 1970).

Both Coxon and Naveh have convincingly argued that Mandaic, Elymaic, and Characenean are eastern Aramaic scripts[9] and cannot be derived from Nabataean. The argument for the western origin of the script rests upon two bases—the ligatures and the superficial resemblance of the ʾ in Nabataean and Mandaic. One argument against the theory of a western origin (which I have not seen raised in the literature) is the fact that Mandaic makes no distinction between final and non-final forms, which is a diagnostic feature of not only the cursive western Middle Aramaic scripts (Nabataean and Syriac), but also the Jewish (Hebrew) script as well. Furthermore, the Pahlavi script is famously ligatured, and this feature is absent from it as well. The presence of final forms is an important diagnostic feature distinguishing the ductus of the western Middle Aramaic scripts from that of the eastern Middle Aramaic scripts.

ELYMAIC AND CHARACENEAN

Naveh's argument, that Mandaic is a "more developed" form of the Elymaic script, is less convincing, as he is unable to offer an example of the immediate precursor of either script for the purposes of comparison. The closest he can provide is the script of the Aśoka inscription, which predates this material by nearly half a millennium. Furthermore, the earliest Mandaic material is several centuries later than the Elymaic material. For this reason, Coxon tentatively suggests that the Characenean coin legends, which appear later than the Elymaic material and more closely resemble epigraphic Mandaic, are a better candidate. In the final analysis, neither Elymaic nor Characenean is a satisfactory candidate for the ancestor to the Mandaic script, for precisely the same reasons that they attracted Naveh and Coxon—they are obscure, provincial, and late. These two were employed exclusively within the Parthian client kingdoms of Elymais and Mesene (Characene), respectively, and their use appears to be restricted solely to the local dynasties. Unlike the Mandaic script, these two scripts represent a historical curiosity—an evolutionary dead

[5] Most of the bowls that have been published were acquired from dealers, and very few have any association with an archaeological site, which makes their dating difficult. The bowls excavated at Nippur belong to the seventh century; see Montgomery 1913: 13–14 and Hunter 1994: 605; one bowl, excavated at Ana, belongs to the eighth century, according to Hunter 1994: 607.

[6] For further details about this important corpus of inscriptions, see Lidzbarski 1909: 349–73; Macuch 1967: 91–203 and 1968: 34–72; Caquot 1972: 67–87; Naveh 1975: 47–53; and Greenfield and Naveh 1985. The most recent discussion of the lead rolls is Müller-Kessler 1999.

[7] That is to say, the Mandaic vowel letters are not *matres lectiones*; see the discussion below.

[8] For this group of inscriptions, see Bivar and Shaked 1964.

[9] Or, more properly, are representative of the eastern ductus of the Middle Aramaic scripts.

end in the development of the Aramaic scripts in the east.

Coins with Elymaic legends do not appear until after the local dynasty had been supplanted by a line of kings with Parthian names, in the latter half of the first century.[10] Prior to this point, the legends found on the coins of the local rulers of Elymais, the Kamnaskirids, were in Greek alone (Guélpin 1965: 19–26).[11] Greek appears to have been discarded throughout the Parthian Empire in favor of Aramaic and Parthian, a change that became effective by 53 C.E. Bivar associates this switch with the revolt of the city of Seleucia against Parthian rule between 35 and 42 C.E. (Bivar 1967: 517). From the middle of the first century until the end of the Parthian Empire, the local rulers of Elymais were alternately vassals of the Parthian Empire and independent sovereigns. It cannot be coincidental that, after Ardaxšīr defeated the last member of this dynasty in 221 C.E. and seized Elymais, the Elymaic script disappears from history.[12] In short, the brief span during which the script was used coincides with a period of Parthian clients in Elymais and an increase in the use of the Aramaic language and the Parthian chancery script throughout the empire, at the expense of Greek.

Mesene did not begin to issue coins with Aramaic legends until much later, starting in the second half of the second century C.E., following the reassertion of Arsacid influence in this region, which had briefly been occupied by Trajan and whose sovereigns were often in revolt against their Parthian suzerains. Four of the published coins bear the legend **ybygn'y mlk'** "King Ibignai," whom Lidzbarski (1909: 87) dates within the period between 150 and 224 C.E.[13] Altheim suggests an even later date, on the basis of a passage in Ishodad of Merv's commentary on Genesis; accordingly, he claims that the Characenean script must have been created at some point between the accession of Ardaxšīr-ī Pābagān in 208 C.E. and the defeat of the Arsacids in 224 C.E., whereupon Ardaxšīr deposed the local dynasty (Altheim 1969: 31–32). Sellwood also identifies the final series of Characenean tetradrachms with the period around 200 C.E. (Sellwood 1983: 313–14). The fact that the two scripts to which the Mandaic script is most frequently compared—namely, Elymaic and Characenean—are products of the latter half of the Parthian period is undeniably significant.

COMPARISON WITH THE PARTHIAN SCRIPT

According to Jorunn J. Buckley (2002: 4), the colophons in the *Left Ginza* indicate that the oldest portions of the Mandaic textual tradition date several generations before the time of Mani, i.e., to the beginning of the third century C.E. at the latest.[14] The primacy of the Mandaean tradition relative to the Manichaean is confirmed by the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-Book, which contains material adapted from the Mandaean **masiqta** or "death mass," found also in the *Left Ginza* (Säve-Söderbergh 1949: 163). In the absence of any evidence suggesting that the Mandaeans preserved their religious literature in any script other than the present one, we must assume that the colophons provide us with a terminus ante quem for the composition of the sacred literature in the Mandaic script. The evidence of the colophons is corroborated by the Mandaeans' own historical traditions, which maintain that they settled in the region from parts farther north at the behest of a king Ardawān, whose descendants were subsequently defeated by the Sassanians (Drower 1953: 3–14). It cannot be mere coincidence that both the Mandaean textual tradition and their own historical traditions situate them in the vicinity of Mesene and Elymais during the latter half of the Parthian Empire. Consequently, it seems only logical to seek the context of these three scripts within the Parthian Empire during this period.

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[10] Sellwood (1983: 308–9) suggests that these kings may have been a junior branch of the Arsacid family. This hypothesis was first advanced by Rostovtzeff (1936: 118), on the basis of the numismatic evidence.

[11] According to Hansman (1998), the title Kamnaskires may be related to the Elamite title ⟨qa-ap-nu-iš-ki-ra⟩ *kapnušgir* "treasurer."

[12] Coxon (1970: 30) argues that it is "quite feasible" that the Mandaeans could have adopted one of these scripts a century or more after they are first attested, but I fail to see how this is possible with the scripts under consideration here, which were obscure, provincial, and most importantly, obsolete after the fall of the Arsacids.

[13] **Bold** letters indicate transliterations of Mandaic characters and those in related scripts. The phonemes that they represent are transcribed within /slashes/ (see below). The convention adopted here for transliterations of Mandaic characters is the one found in Drower and Macuch 1963: xii.

[14] Buckley has traced an unbroken line of copyists back to a woman by the name of Šlama, daughter of Qidra, who lived several generations before the death of Mani.

During the 1970s, when Naveh, Coxon, and Macuch debated the chronology of these scripts, most of the Aramaic material from the Parthian period was still poorly understood or as yet undiscovered (Skjærvø 1996). Yamauchi (1970: 76) briefly mentions the Parthian ostraca found at Nisa (first century B.C.E.; Nisa is located on the Caspian Sea in modern Turkmenistan), but immediately dismisses them as irrelevant to the question of Mandaean origins. Naveh (1997: 128–31) also mentions the Nisa ostraca in his book on the history of the alphabet, but his treatment of them is superficial. His omission is surprising, considering that the script of the Nisa ostraca is much more proximate, in terms of both time and space, to the bulk of the attested eastern Middle Aramaic scripts than the script of the Aśoka inscription to which he compares them.[15] When one considers the Iranian material (such as the Nisa ostraca or the third-century C.E. Paikuli inscription from northern Iraq), the affinities these scripts share become obvious (table 1):[16]

ʾ The Elymaic form of this letter is clearly a development of the form preserved in Parthian, with the addition of a ligature along the left side of the character. Naveh (1970: 34) compares the Elymaic ʾ to the ʾ of Hatra in northern Iraq. While the Mandaic ʾ is certainly more developed than the Elymaic ʾ, this does not necessarily indicate its descent from the Elymaic, as this same form has been observed elsewhere.[17]

b The line beneath the letter, which continues to the right, is an innovation upon the original letter found only in the Elymaic inscriptions. Mandaic does not share this feature.

g The Tang-e Sarvak **g** differs from the Parthian **g** through the addition of a horizontal stroke at the top, not found in the Mandaic **g**.

d The dot found beneath the Parthian **d** (added to distinguish it from **r** and ʿ) has been joined to the body of the original character with a ligature in the Elymaic script, just as it has at Armazi, at the other extreme of the Parthian Empire, in Georgia (Naveh 1997: 142).[18] Neither the ligature nor the dot is found under the Mandaic **d**, which preserves the same form as the Nisa **d**.[19]

ṭ If the readings of this infrequently attested character are correct, the Elymaic **ṭ** could only have developed from the Parthian **ṭ**. The two halves of the Parthian **ṭ** have been joined by a ligature in Elymaic along the bottom of the character. One of the attested forms of the Mandaic **ṭ** found in the script of incantation bowls also appears to derive from the **ṭ** of the later Parthian inscriptions. Unlike the Elymaic **ṭ**, however, the ligature spans the top of the character rather than the bottom.[20]

y The Elymaic **y**, consisting of a single stroke or even a simple dot, represents a simplification of the original two-stroke **y**, which survives in Mandaic.[21]

k The cursive Elymaic **k** represents a simplification of the angular **k**, the original form of which survives in Parthian and Mandaic.

m The Elymaic **m** has become simplified to an x in the Tang-e Sarvak inscription. Mandaic retains the original form.[22]

n **n** in Elymaic and Mandaic are identical and appear to have developed independently from the same origin.

ʿ It is highly unlikely that the angular, three-stroke ʿ found in Mandaic developed from the two-stroke Elymaic ʿ; both forms, however, are found in the Nisa ostraca. Like its Parthian analogue, Elymaic ʿ resembles **r** and **d**, whereas

[15] The bilingual Aramaic-Greek Aśoka inscription was discovered near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and dates to the third century B.C.E.; see Naveh 1997: 137.

[16] For the purposes of this discussion, "Elymaic" shall refer specifically to the inscriptions of Tang-e Sarvak and Shimbār; "Parthian," unless otherwise identified, refers primarily to the inscriptions from the second and third centuries C.E., some of which (such as the Paikuli inscription, 292 C.E.) date to the period of the early Sassanians; and "Mandaic" refers principally to the script of the lead amulet inscriptions.

[17] Most notably in the monumental Nabataean script; the similarity of the monumental Nabataean ʾ to the Mandaic ʾ was the basis for many of the early arguments identifying the two scripts.

[18] Note also the diacritic over the **r** at Garni. Naveh attributes the diacritics at Garni to Syriac influence, but they are not attested in the contemporary Syriac inscriptions. In fact, the earliest attestation of the dots distinguishing **d** from **r** in Syriac is found only in an Estrangela manuscript dated 411 C.E.; see Healey 2000.

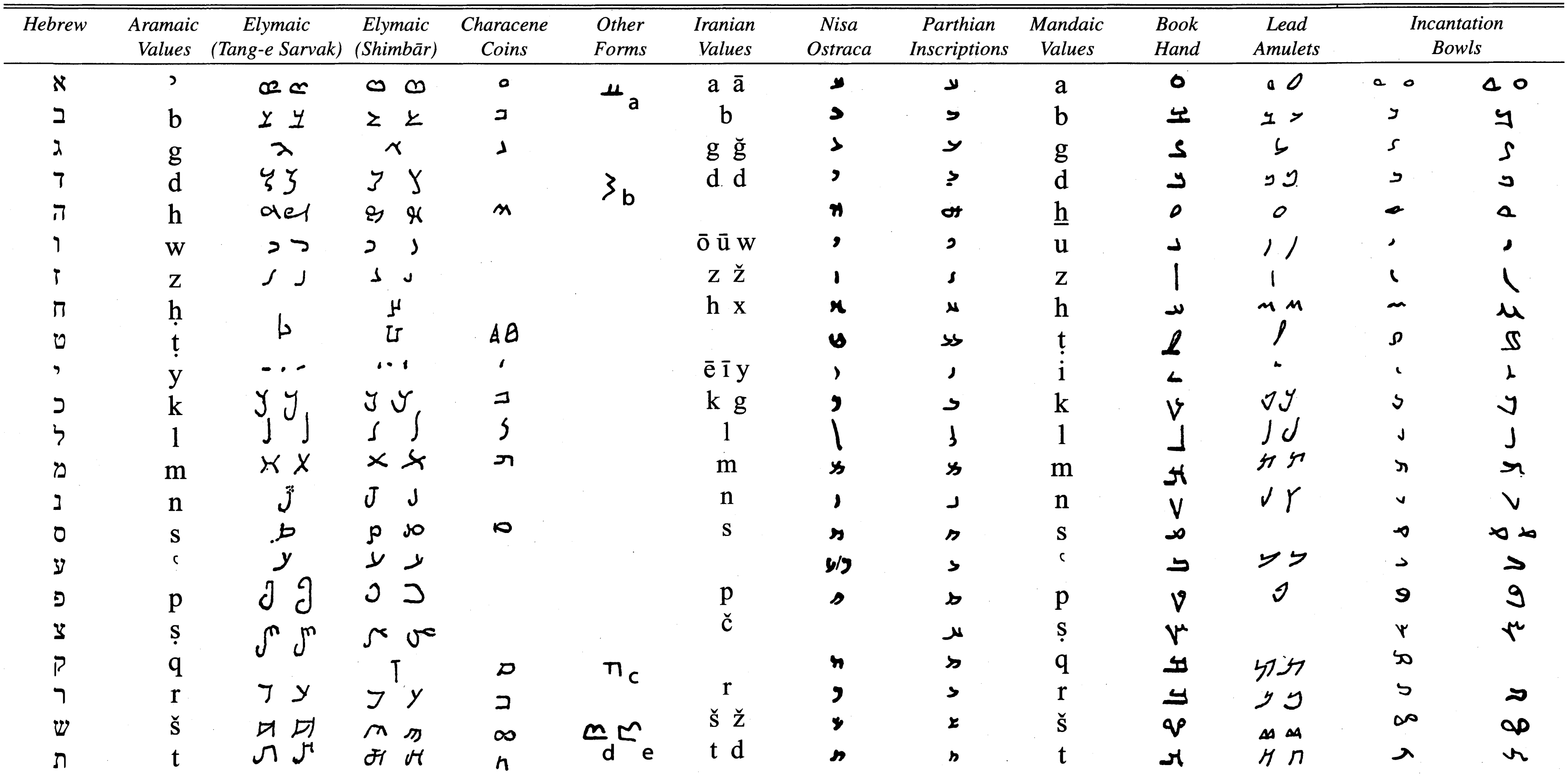
[19] If the two share the same origin, this suggests that the Mandaic script is more conservative than the others in this regard, having not adopted this convention.

[20] Coxon (1970: 26) notes that "no affinity pertains to the Mandaic form of the letter," but adds that he is wary of conclusions drawn from the reading of this character in the Elymaic material. Given that the **ṭ** is uncommon in any Semitic language, his caveat need not apply only to Elymaic.

[21] It is not clear to me how the "non-ligatured *yod*" could be an "offshoot of the Elymaic *yod*, which is reduced to a dot," as Naveh (1970: 36) asserts.

[22] Naveh concedes this point in his discussion of the Elymaic evidence (1970: 36).

TABLE 1. Comparison of Elymaic, Characenean, Parthian, and Mandaic Scripts



Hebrew	Aramaic Values	Iranian Values	Mandaic Values
א	ʾ	a ā	a
ב	b	b	b
ג	g	g ǧ	g
ד	d	d d	d
ה	h		h̲
ו	w	ō ū w	u
ז	z	z ž	z
ח	ḥ	h x	h
ט	ṭ		ṭ
י	y	ē ī y	i
כ	k	k g	k
ל	l	l	l
מ	m	m	m
נ	n	n	n
ס	s	s	s
ע	ʿ		ʿ
פ	p	p	p
צ	ṣ	č	ṣ
ק	q		q
ר	r	r	r
ש	š	š ž	š
ת	t	t d	t

Sources: The Elymaic forms from Tang-e Sarvak and Shimbār forms have been adapted from Bivar and Shaked 1964: 270; the Characene coin legends are from Coxon 1970: 21; other Aramaic forms cited above are from Naveh 1997: 142 (a = Hatra, b = Armazi, c = Hartra, d = Hassan-Kef, e = Garni); the forms from the Nisa ostraca and the Parthian inscriptions are from Skærvø 1996: 518; the Mandaic book hand is based on Macuch and Drower 1963: xii; the forms from the lead amulets are based on Coxon 1970: 21, and the two sets of scripts from the incanation bowls are taken from bowl 079M (BM 117872) and 087M (BM 91779), respectively, in Segal and Hunter 2000: 237.

the Mandaic ʿ has not been conflated with these other consonants.

p Coxon (1970: 28) notes that the full curve to the left at the foot of the letter in the Shimbār inscriptions is a feature of the Elymaic group and is not repeated elsewhere.

ṣ The three-stroke Parthian ṣ is clearly the forerunner to the four-stroke ṣ found in Book Mandaic and the later Elymaic inscriptions. The ṣ found in Bowl 079M in the British Museum collection has the same number of strokes as the Parthian ṣ; Bowl 087M, on the other hand, more closely resembles the four-stroke Book Mandaic ṣ. The final stroke in the Mandaic ṣ rises higher than that in the Parthian ṣ, and curves outward, away from the character. In contrast, the ṣ attested at Shimbār has the same number of strokes as the Parthian, but the final stroke descends even lower before it curves back toward the character, a trend that becomes even more pronounced in the Tang-e Sarvak script. In the latter script, the ṣ assumes a more cursive and elaborate form than it does elsewhere.

q No indisputable example of **q** appears in the Elymaic corpus.[23] The Mandaic **q** resembles the Parthian **q** and those found elsewhere,[24] a rectangular form with rounded corners.

r In the Elymaic material, the horizontal stroke of the **r** joins the perpendicular either at the top, as in the **d**, or the center, making it resemble the ʿ. This confusion is also typical of the Parthian material (in the later Iranian scripts, **r** and ʿ eventually merge with **w** and even **n**). The corners of the **r** are rounded, unlike the Mandaic **r**. Mandaic shares with other earlier Semitic scripts a confusing similarity between the **r** and the **d**, unlike Elymaic, Parthian, or the script at Garni, all of which have adopted a convention to distinguish between the two.

š The form of the Elymaic š is perhaps the most unique and difficult to explain of all the characters in the script. It certainly bears no resemblance to the š found in Parthian, Mandaic, or other contemporary scripts. The Aramaic š generally develops along two predictable axes—either a line along the bottom or (less frequently) along the left-hand side of the character. At first glance, the Elymaic š appears to be upside down.

One of the forms attested at Shimbār may provide a clue to the development of this unusual form. Its central line is connected to the left-hand vertical at its base. This suggests that the Elymaic š developed along the left-hand vertical, which was joined to the other two verticals by a ligature at the top. Gradually these verticals detached themselves from the left-hand vertical, resulting in the form attested at Tang-e Sarvak.

The Mandaic š is no less unusual. Naveh (1970: 37) maintains that the two forms are related, but correctly notes (1972: 293–304) that the Mandaic š finds its closest parallels in northern Mesopotamia, at Hassan-Kef in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn and Garni in Armenia, both in Parthian territory and both dating to the second half of the second century, much like ʾ and **q**. It is important to note, however, that unlike the Elymaic š, none of these forms could have developed along the left-hand vertical.

Most of the characters in the Elymaic script are either identical with the forms found in contemporary Parthian inscriptions (such as **w**, **z**, **ḥ**, **l**, **r**, and the **t** at Tang-e Sarvak), or have clearly developed along the lines of other cursive scripts found in the Near East during this period (to this category belong the **h** and possibly the Shimbār **t**, which have close parallels within the extreme cursive Post-Herodian script discovered at Wadi Murabbaʿat in the West Bank).[25] In light of this data, a few features of the underlying ductus of this group of scripts may be tentatively identified:

- The scripts are cursive in comparison with other Middle Aramaic scripts, with fewer sharp angles, a reduction in the number of strokes for most characters, and ligatures between individual strokes in others, with the result that several letters (particularly **d**, ʿ, and **r**) are conflated.

[23] Naveh (1970: 36) rejects the sole example of **q** found in the corpus on the grounds that it cannot be correct, and suggests an alternate reading of the material which yields a **q** that bears a remarkable similarity to the Elymaic **g**.

[24] Coxon (1970: 28) notes the similarity between the **q** in Mandaic and epigraphic Syriac; the Characenean **q**, which is related, agrees with incantation bowls. Naveh (1970: 35) compares the **q**, like the ʾ, with that attested at Hatra. Naveh's "northern Mesopotamian" **q** is nearly identical to the Parthian **q**.

[25] Jo Ann Hackett first indicated to me the similarity of the Elymaic form with the Post-Herodian; see Yardeni 1997: 191. This same **h** also has a parallel in the final **h** in cursive Nabataean, albeit probably as the result of independent development.

- Due to the confusion arising from the simplification of these characters, a diacritic (taking the form of a dot or a stroke beneath the **d**) was adopted to distinguish between them.[26]
- Ligatures feature prominently in these scripts, connecting the individual strokes of each character and, in the case of the relative particle **zy** (Mandaic **ḏ**), connecting one consonant with another.
- In contrast with the western ductus of the Middle Aramaic scripts, such as Jewish (Hebrew), Nabataean, and Syriac, no distinction is made between the final forms and non-final forms of the characters.

What arises from the ensemble of these features is a discrete group of scripts arrayed in a broad geographic and chronological range, from the region of the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia, to Elymais and Characene in southern Mesopotamia. Members of this group are first attested during the second century C.E. and survive today in the form of the scripts employed in the Mandaean and Zoroastrian sacred literature. The dating of the members of this group in relation to one another and the precise genetic relationships between them are more difficult to ascertain from comparison alone. My first impression is that the Mandaic script is one of the most conservative members of this group. While it is more heavily ligatured than the Elymaic and Characenean scripts, it is not as heavily ligatured as Book Pahlavi; nor is it as cursive as the Book Pahlavi, Elymaic, or even the later Parthian script.[27] It also does not participate in the innovation adopted by the others to distinguish between the **d** and the **r**.

It is true that the script of the Mandaic lead amulets is superficially most similar to that of the Characenean coin legends. Nonetheless, a number of features demonstrate the more conservative nature of the amulet script, despite the fact that it is chronologically later. Note that the heads of the **b**, the **k**, and the **r** have been simplified to a horizontal stroke in the coin legends, with the result that these characters resemble one another, while each maintains its separate identity in the amulet script. Intriguingly, these same features are maintained in the Mandaic book hand, which clearly distinguishes between these characters. Thus it is impossible that either the book hand or the amulet script could have developed from the Characenean script. Both Naveh (1970: 36) and Coxon (1970: 26) assume that the Mandaic **ṭ** developed from the triangular Characenean **ṭ**, but the Characenean **ṭ** is so idiosyncratic, and so unlike the form of the Parthian **ṭ** (which offers a much more suitable candidate for the ancestor to the Mandaic form), that it is most likely the result of independent development.

Within the corpus of incantation texts, the script found in the lead amulets more closely approximates that found in the manuscripts than the bowl script, despite the relative antiquity of the lead rolls in comparison with either the incantation bowls or the earliest manuscripts. This is contrary to expectations, as the process of engraving an inscription upon a lead roll is quite different from that of writing it upon a terracotta bowl or manuscript page, and considering the fact that the bowls are much closer in date to the earliest surviving manuscripts. Naveh (1970: 33) noted that the cursive forms in the lead rolls and the bowl texts could only be derived from the book hand—despite the fact that our earliest manuscripts date from the eighth century and most of the bowls are presumably pre-Islamic.[28] As the Mandaic book hand has not changed appreciably in the intervening centuries, it becomes clear that it is a very conservative script, much like its cousin the Jewish (Hebrew) script.[29] Considering that Mandaean attitudes toward their liturgical language and sacred literature parallel Jewish attitudes toward theirs, it is not surprising that the Mandaic script has been passed down through the generations with the same degree of care.[30]

The historical circumstances and the comparison of the scripts suggest that the model for the ductus of this group of scripts was provided by the Parthian chancery script. Additional support for this argument

[26] See fn. 18 above. This feature is also found in Syriac, which is not a member of this group, but not in Mandaic or Book Pahlavi, which are. This suggests that we are dealing with a convention that was adopted by the others at some indeterminate date rather than one that was inherited.

[27] Coxon's suggestion (1970: 29) that the Elymaic has adhered to the archaic lapidary script more rigorously than the "cursive" Mandaic seems less likely after comparison with the Parthian material.

[28] A few of the bowls show Arabic influence, but the scholarly consensus is that the bulk of the corpus dates to the period immediately preceding the Islamic conquest; see Segal and Hunter 2000: 21–22.

[29] Note that the script of the Dead Sea Scrolls is immediately comprehensible to any scholar familiar with the conventional Hebrew script, having not changed appreciably in the intervening two millennia.

[30] The Mandaic bowl script, on the other hand, must represent the development of a contemporaneous cursive script, analogous to the Post-Herodian cursive script attested at Wadi Murabbaʿat.

is provided by the ligatured **zy** in Elymaic, which resembles the Mandaic relative pronoun **ḏ**; Naveh argues that "it can hardly be doubted that Mandaic **ḏ** developed from Elymaic **zy** and not the other way around." This same ligature, however, is much more common than Naveh would have us believe; it is found in the other Aramaic scripts adapted to Iranian languages, such as the Psalter Script and Book Pahlavi.[31] It is much more likely that this ligatured **zy** originated in Iran and spread from there to these other provincial scripts, rather than the reverse.[32]

IRANIAN AND MANDAIC VOWEL LETTERS

Inscriptions in the Parthian language (as opposed to Aramaic inscriptions written by Parthians) are first attested from the mid-second century C.E. onward. Among the orthographic features that distinguish these inscriptions from their Aramaic counterparts (such as the confusion between **h** and **ḥ**) is a system of vowel letters, which has supplanted the *matres lectiones* found in the Aramaic scripts. The vowel letters developed along lines remarkably similar to those along which the Greek vowels developed. The glottal stop ʾ and the voiced pharyngeal ʿ are not part of the Iranian phonemic repertoire, and consequently the characters representing them were pressed into service to indicate either open vowels such as a and ā or closed vowels such as i, ī, e, and ē, respectively. Initially, only word-initial and word-final vowels were indicated in this way, but these vowel letters quickly came to be employed word-internally as well. Likewise, the semi-vowels **y** and **w** were employed to indicate the closed front vowels i, ī, e, and ē and the closed back vowels o, ō, u, and ū, respectively, just as in contemporary Aramaic inscriptions, albeit in a more consistent manner.

What distinguishes these characters from the equivalent *matres lectiones* in Aramaic is not merely the consistency of their application, but the fact that they are exclusively used to indicate vowels and semi-vowels, just as in Greek, whereas the *matres lectiones* are consonants, first and foremost, which are occasionally employed to indicate the presence of a vowel. This distinction is subtle, yet crucial for the understanding of the development of these scripts. All of the Aramaic dialects attested during the Arsacid and Sassanian eras employ *matres lectiones* rather than vowel letters, with the sole exception of Mandaic.

The fact that even the earliest Mandaic inscriptions feature a phonetic orthography, with a fully developed vowel letter system, should give most Aramaic scholars pause. Frankly, it is surprising that scholars such as Macuch and Nöldeke—who were both Iranists as well as Semitists—never challenged the assumption that the Mandaeans developed this system on their own.[33] Note that the letters **a**, **i**, **u**, and **ẖ**, while formally derived from Aramaic consonants,[34] are nonetheless used only to indicate vowels or semi-vowels, never consonants. Mandaic **a** is never used to represent the glottal stop /ʔ/, which is indicated by a separate letter ʿ; Mandaic **ẖ** is never used to indicate /h/, which is represented by the letter **h**. In addition to indicating the third masculine singular enclitic pronoun, which is its most common function, **ẖ** was also employed to indicate the indefinite morpheme (Macuch 1965: 207) and the Iranian *ẹzāfe*, all three of which, judging by their perennial confusion with the plural morpheme **-ia** in the incantation texts, were most likely pronounced */iː/.[35] Note that Mandaic **ẖ** is also never used to indicate final /aː/, unlike its equivalent in other Aramaic scripts; likewise, **a** is used to indicate /a/ or /aː/ in any position, which is most certainly not the case elsewhere in Aramaic, where it may indicate almost any vowel and is found primarily in word-final position.

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31 See examples in Skjærvø 1996: 523–24. The ligature appears in Book Pahlavi only before enclitic pronominal suffixes.

32 An interesting cross-linguistic parallel is found in Taiwan. Taiwan has historically had strong ties to Japan, despite the fact that its official language is Mandarin, which is written using a much more traditional form of the characters used on the mainland. In Taiwan, the Japanese *hiragana* character *no* is often substituted for Chinese *de*, a particle that indicates possession in a similar, although not identical, manner as the Mandaic relative pronoun **ḏ**-; the *hiragana* syllabary is a cursive, simplified version of the more traditional characters used by the Chinese.

33 Note Blake 1940: 404: "The Mandaeans, an Aramaic-speaking Gnostic sect of lower Babylonia (Iraq), have developed a complete system of independent vowel writing based on the *matres lectionis*, but as the relation of the consonantal forms with the other Aramaic alphabets is obscure, and we know nothing about the time or manner of the introduction of the vowel system, it is impossible to speak with certainty about its origin." Blake tentatively advanced the hypothesis that the vowel system had been borrowed from the Syriac writings of the Church of the East in the eighth century C.E., which, as we have seen, is untenable today.

34 The forms of these letters are derived from Aramaic ʾ, **y**, **w**, and **h**, respectively.

35 The last two morphemes were borrowed from the Iranian languages. The evidence for the use of this character to represent the *ẹzāfe* comes from the corpus of Mandaic incantation texts; see Montgomery 1913: 39, and examples on pp. 203–4 and 252. In Parthian this letter is also used to indicate other final vowels such as the feminine ending /a/; see Skjærvø 1996: 516.

Further evidence of the influence of the Iranian writing systems on the Mandaic is provided by the use of the Mandaic ʿ to represent the prothetic syllable which breaks up initial consonant clusters, in much the same manner as Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian (Skjærvø 1996: 531). The ensemble of these features shared between the Iranian and Mandaic writing systems suggests that the two are related; logic dictates that the Mandaeans, who were subject to the Arsacids and the Sassanians, followed the latter in this regard. While the possibility that the Mandaic writing system developed independently of the Iranian ones cannot be entirely discounted, it is nonetheless significant that it agrees with Middle Persian in all of these particulars, and that all of contemporary Aramaic scripts to which Mandaic is more commonly compared, such as Elymaic and Characenean, follow the more traditional (i.e., etymological) orthography.[36]

[36] It must be admitted that the only clear word from the Characene coin legends is **mlkʾ** "king."

CONCLUSION

After comparison with the other Aramaic scripts of the Parthian Empire, we can only come to the conclusion that the Parthian chancery script influenced and perhaps even gave rise to new scripts for formerly unwritten Aramaic languages such as Elymaic, Characenean, and Mandaic. If, as the evidence suggests, these three scripts derived from the Parthian chancery script, and their adoption followed the Arsacids' gradual abandonment of Hellenism from 53 C.E. onward, then the Mandaeans must have adopted their script at some point during the latter half of the period of Arsacid rule, and more specifically between the second half of the first century and the end of the second century, the terminus ante quem for the composition of Mandaic texts given by the colophons. While the written literature of the Mandaeans continued to grow during the Sassanian era and even into the Islamic period, its origins should be sought within the Arsacid era.

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